The one thing that everyone knows about ostriches is their feeble psychology. What other life-form so lucidly embodies the temptations of denial? For centuries, satirists have paid homage to ostrich idiocy whenever they needed to mock the politicians of the day. Big butt in the air, head buried in the sand.

As a boy, I knew from experience that no ostrich behaved like that. Sure, it was a gawky, bone-headed creature. But the closest any ostrich came to going underground was its imitation bush trick. I had seen it in the South African veld: when danger threatened, the ostrich hen would sit dead still to avoid detection, flattening her endless neck against the earth like a garden hose. A flattened ostrich easily blends into the dry Karoo bushes, which, for most of the year, are greyish humps of dead-looking sticks. I could picture a bushy-looking ostrich being nibbled by a half-blind goat.

The ostrich has been in denial for nearly two thousand years, ever since the world’s first natural historian, Pliny the Elder, saddled the bird with its reputation for head burial. Pliny, it seems, had something of a subterranean fixation. On observing that swallows disappeared each autumn, he surmised that they didn’t fly away at all, but buried themselves in mud and spent the winter underground. Pliny was a charming writer, but as a scientist he leaned towards the fantastic.

The ostrich, it is true, lacks the romantic qualities that humans from Icarus to John Keats have sought in birds. In two million years, the ostrich hasn’t learned to fly or sing. Nature has left it glued to the ground, and its musical talents are crude: it can barely muster a croak. Yet this creature has feathered our dreams more luxuriously than any other—as the plumed passions of Tutankhamen, the Roman emperors, the Black Prince, Napoléon, the Folies-Bergère, Marlene Dietrich, Queen Victoria, and Elton John all testify. For
From Ostrich Farming in South Africa by Arthur Douglass (London: Cassell,PETTER, GALPHIN & CO.)
thousands of years, we’ve borrowed ostrich glamour and used it to signal sexual and imperial power, seductive spectacle, hyperbole, escape.

Great thinkers have pitted their wits against the ostrich, from Aristotle to the eighteenth-century French biologist Georges-Louis Leclerc. Some concluded that this flightless, songless, egg-laying leviathan was one of nature’s freakshows, a cross between a mammal and a bird. When Linnaeus classified our planet’s avifauna in 1758, he memorialized the creature’s oddity. Noting that desert voyagers readily confused ostriches and camels from a distance, he gave the bird the scientific name that it still bears today: Struthio camelus—the sparrow-camel.

My understanding of ostriches would have remained extremely limited if it hadn’t been for Dad. He used to drive my brother and me deep into the Karoo—South Africa’s vast scrub desert—where the big birds lived. But Dad himself had zero interest in birds. Generally speaking, he mistrusted anything that moved: winged creatures, people who were always pulling up their roots. He believed in staying put. He was a one-town, one-marriage, one-job-for-life kind of guy. Plants were his passion.

For more than forty years, he worked for a tiny provincial newspaper, the Eastern Province Herald. Every Wednesday morning for four decades, Herald readers woke to Dad’s gardening column, which he called “Growing Things.” He never put his name to the column; he always signed it “Babiana,” his nom de flore, borrowed from a tiny plant endemic to our area. Babiana is a ground orchid, a crawler, easily overlooked until it blooms with the spring rains. The name suited Dad. By nature, he hugged the ground, belonging where he was in a deep-rooted, unobtrusive way. In all his deepest sentiments, he was a local man.

It was “Growing Things” that first took me into ostrich country. Dad was always on the lookout for the little-known wonders of desert plants. He’d never been to university; he lacked any scientific training. But over a lifetime he used his camera, his car, and his natural curiosity to turn himself into an amateur botanist. He believed you had a
moral obligation to know the place you lived in, preferably in Latin. As we traveled across the Karoo, he'd make jottings in his notebook while mumbling plant names to himself. Those names still tinkle through my head like the childhood tunes my sisters coaxed from the piano: Euphorbia decepta, Hermannia desertorum, Aloe microstigma, Kedrostis africana. I, too, spent long, hot days learning Latin names. But only the names of birds. If I remembered plant names it was an accident; plants held no interest for me at all.

At age eleven, I began to keep a diary called “Flying Things.” For five years I filled it with looping observations on every bird I saw, named in English and veld Latin. I included careful notes on ostriches, though strictly speaking they weren’t flying things at all.

The bird diary was my way of maneuvering some space, my attempt to escape from beneath my father’s shadow and all that overhanging foliage. This involved one of those contrapuntal movements at which children excel: I studied Dad carefully and made it my mission to become his opposite. He knew everything about roots, so I became obsessed with flight. He held the ground, so I took to the air.

I became a fledgling ornithologist. During childhood and adolescence every other calling seemed unimaginably dull.

**Dad had zero interest in birds. Generally speaking, he mistrusted anything that moved: winged creatures, people who were always pulling up their roots.**

I loved things with wings, things that came and went, things that had the power to vanish and reappear. Birds spoke to me of far-off places, offering me an alternative—an otherworldly world.

Becoming a writer was an accidental spin-off of my fidelity to birds. At fifteen, I ventured into print for the first time with a small excerpt from “Flying Things.”

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*Egyptian scene showing a captured ostrich*

From Ostrich Eggshell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern Times by Berthold Laufer (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History)
Things.” The Ostrich, the official journal of the South African Ornithological Society, published my sighting of a migrant whose waywardness was scientifically interesting. My report described a rare bird I’d encountered along the coast near Port Elizabeth—a European oystercatcher that didn’t belong in Africa. Gale-force winds had blown it off course, down from the Northern Hemisphere. For me, that wanderer trailed oceanic worlds of fantasy.

... 

In the 1860s, no Lithuanian Jew was dreaming of a career in ostriches. Or of starting life anew at the bottom of Africa. Especially not in the Karoo: a quarter of a million arid square miles where rain and the sighting of another human were equally memorable events.

But in 1867, a Khoikhoi child’s discovery of a glistening pebble began to change all that. A local trader tested the pebble on his storefront window and found that it cut glass. In the great diamond rush that followed, the colony drew prospectors from around the globe. Migrant mining camps—Cawood’s Hope, Delport’s Hope, Good Hope, Last Hope—sprang up near where the Hope Diamond had been found. Kimberley and the Cape Colony were suddenly names that spelled hope in foreign dreams.

Diamonds brought the first wave of Jewish settlers to South Africa. Some made fortunes so vast that Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, the wealthiest magnate of them all, declared: “Jews are diamonds.” Soon Jews would be ostrich feathers too.

The giant bird’s feathers had been used for adornment since the Roman empire, but in the nineteenth century they became stylish as never before. In the quest for extravagance, the ostrich feather hat brooked no rivals. A prime plume could tower twenty-two inches above the head, while smaller ostrich feathers added foamy volume. Thus began the world’s first ostrich boom.

At the time, ostriches seemed headed
for extinction: plume hunters were slaughtering them all across their range. The giant birds didn’t exactly aid their own survival. When panicked, ostriches run at great velocity, but typically in a circle, which rather defeats any advantage they gain from speed. Their natural enemies — lions, cheetahs, African hunting dogs — know this, and try to cut them off across the diameter. (Some biologists have speculated that ostriches fraternize with zebras and gazelles because, when a predator is spotted, the ungulates help the birds run in a straight line.) This weakness for circular escape afforded colonial hunters ample potshots. They would fire away while their quarry swung round and round them like painted horses bobbing on a fairground carousel.

In 1869, just two years after the discovery of diamonds, an inventive Scotsman called Arthur Douglass radically improved the ostrich’s chances of survival. On his Cape farm, he perfected the world’s first ostrich incubator, which he called the Eclipse. Unlike most of his fellow frontiersmen, Douglass recognized that if you clipped an ostrich instead of putting a bullet in its head, you could turn the bird into a renewable resource. Every nine months, like clockwork, it would reward you with a harvest of exquisite feathers. Soon, armed with an Eclipse, a captive flock, and pruning shears, any indigent immigrant could dream of making a fortune from ostriches.

... The grand era of ostrich feather fashion — from 1881 to World War I — coincided with the high age of Jewish immigration. In the 1860s, southern Africa boasted a total of one rabbi. The region had been virtually untouched by the emigration of German Jews in the first half of the nineteenth century. There was nothing to entice them: no diamonds, no gold, no ostrich trade, and little that they would have recognized as culture. Even in the feather age, Jewish immigrants to South Africa weren’t as diverse as those drawn to America. Almost without exception, they came from a single region: the shtetls of Lithuania.

The Litvaks, as they were known, were frontiersfolk already, used to living on the edge. But the frontier they inhabited was a crowded place: the Pale of
Settlement along Russia's western limit. The Pale dated back to the late eighteenth century, when Catherine the Great seized a large slice of Poland containing 400,000 Jews. Catherine and the czars who followed her barred Jews from settling freely in Russia, confining them to the Pale. By the end of the nineteenth century, that narrow corridor held 3.5 million Jews, twenty times the number spread across the rest of Russia.

Under czarist tyranny, Jews suffered double taxation and forced conscription, and they were barred from owning farmland. Military recruiters invaded villages, kidnapping young boys. Pogrom followed pogrom. After Alexander II's assassination in 1881, these assaults reached a new pitch of viciousness. That year, anti-Semites attacked 263 shtetls across a swath of southern Russia. Within months, the czarist government issued relocation decrees, uprooting Jews by the hundreds of thousands and packing them into cities. There, most languished in terror and joblessness.

The Pale Jews knew little enough about America. But South Africa must have seemed whole galaxies away. Rumors began to circulate about a place deep in the African desert where a person could grow rich herding huge flightless birds. Some Lithuanian refugees fell captive to this dream; they became argonauts, risking everything in their quest for the gigantic golden geese.

Before chancing their luck on the grueling voyage from the Pale to the Karoo, what could these Jews have known of ostriches? Certainly, no shtetl-dweller was likely to have seen an ostrich in the flesh. The ostrich must have appeared to them as a creature of the mind, a dreambird, weighing in the scales of reality not much more than a unicorn.

Perhaps some stranger passed through the villages bearing an ostrich plume. But a large feather is still just a feather: frail evidence for the existence of a money-spinning bird eight feet tall, weighing as much as two men. A feather could be a hoax. After all, European explorers used to return from Greenland's seas brandishing the narwhal's cork-
screw tusk as proof of the unicorn’s materiality.

... Jewish refugees who fled to colonial South Africa usually followed a set course from Lithuania through the Russian port of Libau to England; they were housed at the London Jews’ Temporary Shelter while they awaited the documents that would grant them entry to the Cape. Finally, at Southampton, the gangplank closed behind them and they set sail for Africa’s farthest tip. Many of those who boarded were children traveling alone. One woman, fearing separation from her five progeny in a land of strangers and strange tongues, took the precaution of sewing squares of her dress fabric onto the clothes of each daughter and son. That way, she prayed, the family bonds would be visible to all.

On arriving in South Africa, many Litvaks clung to Cape Town, the only city of any consequence. Others headed north for the mining madness of Kimberley and, later, Johannesburg, where gold had been discovered in 1886. Some bolder families trekked to the town of Oudtshoorn, which was soon to become the world’s ostrich capital. To get there, the Jewish trekkers had to hazard the Karoo’s furnace summer, which consumed most of spring and autumn, too. But in the midst of the sprawling scrub desert, these wayfarers also found new liberties. At last, they were free to own land, to work at their chosen occupations, to worship unmolested. Word spread that this ostrich oasis offered religious sanctuary. Soon, Oudtshoorn had acquired a new name: Yerushalayim shel d’rom Afrika, the Jerusalem of Africa.

Has there ever been a Promised Land that wasn’t brutally cleared of its inhabitants to make it seem more promising? The Jews were refugees. But like all of South Africa’s Europeans, they were colonial invaders, too.

Since the eighteenth century, white settlers had fought episodic wars against the Nguni in the lush lands to the east of the desert. The spoils were frontier fundamentals: grazing rights, cattle, water, land. But the late-nineteenth-century rush of immigrants from Europe, including Lithuania, coincided with a sudden change in the scale and urgency of British designs on southern Africa. The discovery of the world’s richest gold and diamond fields transformed the region into prime imperial real estate. Hope was twinned with greed.

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The mines attracted penniless dreamers from around the world, while turning Africans into involuntary migrants in their own land. The mines became sinkholes for African aspirations. Colonial magnates started to demand armies of cheap labor for their digs, so the authorities built those armies...
by spreading poverty: levering African farmers off their land with taxes, wars, and seizures. The newly dispossessed began trailing back and forth between mining misery and their shrinking lands. Migrant laborers seems a callous euphemism for people so cynically uprooted and driven into lives of restless indigence.

The Karoo itself possessed neither mineral wealth nor fertile grazing; it was too parched to sustain many people. But while nineteenth-century Jews and Afrikaners dreamt of it as their Promised Land, people had been living there for at least twenty thousand years. The Karoo belonged first to the San: a roving group of hunter-gatherers whose claim on the land colonials and nonnomadic Africans could readily discount. The advancing whites and their flocks denuded the Karoo of game—the antelope, zebra, giraffe, and ostrich on which the San's survival depended. At the same time, kraals (corrals), fenced property, branding, and personal livestock were all alien to the San, and the nomads approached the newcomers' livestock as they would any herds of wild animals, shooting them with bows and poisoned arrows for food. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, trekboers and Brits slaughtered the San relentlessly, treating them as little more than vermin. A herdless people, the San lost out to pastoralists competing for their terrain: by the time the Lithuanian Jews arrived, the Karoo's first inhabitants were virtually extinct.

The Khoikhoi, the other people indigenous to the area, fared little better. Pastoralists themselves, they had no defense against Europeans with horses and

From Home Life on an Ostrich Farm by Annie Martin (London: George Philip & Son)
advanced technologies of decimation. Most Khoikhoi ended up working as servants and farm laborers for the victors in the land wars, and Khoikhoi culture vanished beneath a history of conquest and assimilation. To this day, most of the Karoo's inhabitants are Afrikaans-speaking “coloureds”—mixed-race South Africans who trace their ancestry back to the Khoikhoi, the San, the Dutch, the Huguenots, the Xhosa, and the British, as well as slaves from the Dutch East Indies and various parts of Africa.

I have on my desk before me a bureaucrat’s list of fifty-one Jewish immigrants to the Jerusalem of Africa who became naturalized between 1883 and 1890. No women are listed: they remain invisibly in tow behind their fathers, husbands, brothers, and uncles. Of those fifty-one new male citizens, thirty-six listed the same profession: “feather buyer.” These refugees dreamt of owning land and ostriches. But in the 1880s, they were still too poor. They had to find some other foothold in this strange, overlit, parched land.

Feather buyer. It sounds professional, respectable. One envisages a merchant and a sprawling warehouse, a background din of money being made, of bidders and auctioneers. But in those early days, a feather buyer was really a feather walker. He walked across the immense scrub desert, up the mountains, down the other side, and back again. The Afrikaners referred to these tireless newcomers as loper-Jode, foot-slogging Jews.

Through his labors, the foot-slogging Jew bequeathed a neologism to the Yiddish language: shmoyzer—a transliteration from the local Dutch word smous—the term for traveling peddler. The shmoyzer schlepped his way from one remote Afrikaans farm to the next. He traded in much more than feathers, carrying a leather bag of goods for barter slung over his buckled back. In that dusty wilderness, money possessed an uncertain reality, but goods were goods. The shmoyzer and the Boer often swapped directly, without cash.

The feather palace ahead of us looked almost edible, as if it belonged on the counter of a giant’s confectionery. It was built from huge sandstone slabs, the color and grainy texture of biscuits. In the late afternoon sun, they gleamed an appetizing yellow.

The novice feather buyer was little more than a wandering shopkeeper. He made ends meet by trading combs, brushes, scissors, mirrors, pots, pans, castor oil, chewing tobacco, snuff, pumpkins, brandy, salt, and buckets. But all the time he kept one eye on his plume dreams. From children and mixed-race
laborers he'd buy cut-price feathers that had fallen off a transport wagon or blown across the farm. The shmoyer would carefully store these modest pickings in a separate leather bag.

In the absence of real roads, the feather buyer followed the dry river beds which offered at least a semblance of a route through a landscape that must have seemed disorientingly featureless. Even the river beds were rugged going. An almost infinite variety of thorn-clad bushes slashed at the shmoyer's clothes. Rocks slit his feet. Sand, endless sand, seeped into his shoes. And the African sun bore down on him with unfamiliar hostility, adding its heaviness to his bag.

As soon as he could, he bought a donkey. Later, he'd trade the donkey for a horse and cart. Strictly speaking, he was a shmoyer no more. With a horse and cart, he'd graduated into a tokher—still roving, but no longer a foot-slogging Jew. By early Edwardian times, some Oudtshoorn Jews had made enough money to purchase their own ostriches and join the ranks of the fashion farmers. And no one ascended from shtetl to shmoyer to fashion farmer more spectacularly than the world ostrich king Max Rose, whose wealth, in today's terms, surpassed 300 million dollars.

European interest in ostriches peaked during the late Victorian years and the belle epoque. Those were the glory days of the feather trade. From the 1880s until World War I, the elegant plumes were more than an accessory to style: on boas and opera cloaks and cascading from hats, they became a fashion fundamental. Even after the century turned, and the stiff corpses of Victorian taxidermy became passé, ostrich feathers remained in vogue. Cascading things came in—crepe de chine, satin, chiffon, lace, tulle, chenille, and wilting feathers—as belle epoque fashions grew frothier. Ostrich plumes still had no equal, bobbing and flouncing, evoking flutter with every dip of the hatted head. The Colonial Ostrich Feather Company on London's Oxford Street prided itself on being "the originators of Direct Supply from Bird to Buyer." By 1910, the company was promoting forty different styles of hats with ostrich trim—like "dainty Marie Antoinette ostrich ruffles to fasten at the neck with satin ribbons."

Enriched—and inspired—by the ostentation of their European customers, Oudtshoorn's turn-of-the-century ostrich barons and baronesses became the faux aristocrats of the veld. Nouveaux riches, they made big money fast and
wanted to make a big statement with equal haste. Max Rose was only one of many barons—Jews, Afrikaners, Englishmen, and Scots—who built feather palaces from the proceeds of their plumes. These huge, eccentric mansions mixed the wildest excesses of Ottoman, Victorian, Greek Revival and Gothic architecture. I got to know the Karoo in the 1960s, more than half a century after the ostrich boom. Chimeras, natural and man-made, rippled through the desert, and the feather palaces seemed of a piece with that illusory world.

The first time I saw a feather palace, Dad was driving us through a dust storm toward the Jerusalem of Africa: suddenly, a huge edifice reared out of nowhere—it seemed to have been conjured from pure air. It looked too big, too fancy to be anybody’s home. I stared with a child’s amazement at the fantasia of turrets, spikes, columns, and twirly gables looming through the dust. I loved the way the roof punched holes in the sky. I’d never seen anything so alien, so magical, so grand.

Dad slowed down and told us the story of the feather palaces. How the ostrich barons had erected them during the height of the feather craze. How they had so much money that they ran out of ways to spend it, so they started erecting rival palaces, each one bigger and fancier than the last.

* Feather palace: even the phrase seemed to have tumbled from the clouds. Palace wasn’t a word that fitted the Karoo. It didn’t belong with mimosa thorns, goats, ostriches, drought, and sunscrunched faces. Palace had a greener feel; it spoke to me of velvety lands, full of princes and princesses, far away and long ago. The word carried to my childhood ears a storybook sound, an echo of make-believe.

The feather palace ahead of us looked almost edible, as if it belonged on the counter of a giant’s confectionery. It was built from huge sandstone slabs, the color and grainy texture of biscuits. In the late afternoon sun, they gleamed an appetizing yellow. The biscuit-cake boasted a frosting of icing-sugar turrets and frilly, white touches that suggested paper doilies. It looked exactly like the kind of delicacy that an adoring mother might conjure for a birthday treat.

The palaces all appeared in a very short time. The first to go up, The Towers, was built in 1903; the last two, Greylands and Pinehurst, were finished in 1911. All nine were the handiwork of two architects: a British settler, Charles Bullock, and a Dutch immigrant named Johannes Egbertus Vixseboexx. Each palace rested on a financial foundation of feathers. And each stood as a reminder to neighbors and passersby that the owners’ ostrich wealth bound them to a finer world than the Karoo: a world of salons, promenades, balls, and lustrous...
garden parties where flair, sensuality, fine breeding, and profligacy ruled.

By 1913, a single top-notch ostrich plume fetched twelve pounds in London, roughly the cost of the four-week sea voyage from England to South Africa. Only gold, diamonds, and wool were more pivotal to South Africa's economy than the nation's 1 million captive ostriches. Foreign fashion was consuming one hundred thousand tons of Karoo feathers annually, and ostrich ranching was making people richer faster than any other kind of farming anywhere in the world. The plumes had soared in value, becoming, ounce for ounce, more precious than gold.

Oudtshoorn, the world's ostrich capital, lay about two hundred miles west of my family's Port Elizabeth home. But if you took the scrub desert route, as we usually did, there was nothing in between except a few dry hamlets with a couple of inbred families each. We would set off in our Opel Kapitan, a big bulbous car with the coloring and lethargy of a camel. Like every car and camera Dad ever owned, it was third-, or fourth-, or fifth-hand. There were no floor gears: the gear stick grew out of the steering wheel, which meant you could pack a driver and three people on the bench seat up front.

Our Kapitan was the envy of every petrol attendant at every gas station we ever visited. We would watch the gauge sliding towards empty, wait for Dad to pull in at the next Mobil or Caltex sign, and then sit back while the haggling began. An African would saunter up, beaming but drowning in those billowing blue overalls attendants were made to wear. “Morning, boss. Best taxi-car in the world, boss. This car is a must-have, boss. Hard to get, boss. Look at this rust, boss. Too old for a whiteman, boss.” There Dad stood, shaking his head and shifting his feet, quietly refusing, utterly ill at ease.

I had visions of him one day, as the gas sizzled into the tank beneath us, poking his head through the window and announcing: “OK, you lot. Pile out. We’re walking from here.” Not because he cared to sell, but just to spare himself these jabbing reminders that—despite his heroic efforts, and Mom’s—we were not quite middle-class.

In truth, he couldn’t sell. The Kapitan’s taxi potential made it ideal for our family. We were a multigenerational, nine-tiered construction, like one of those parking garages that spirals up and up. I was the ground floor. My younger brother Andy must have felt he was destined to be the basement. Up above me was my sister Marion; on the levels beyond her, Sheelagh and then Ruth. Next came mom and dad, then mom’s mom, and right at the top, where the spiral was exposed to the sky, you would find mom’s mom’s dad, whom we knew as Gaffy.

I was much older before I ever heard the phrase “head of the family,” but it was
The world's first ostrich incubator

From Ostrich Farming in South Africa
by Arthur Douglass
(London: Cassell, Petter, Galphin & Co.)

an idea I never quite understood. Our family never had a head or a ceiling. Dad was lost in the middle somewhere. As a child, I half-expected that at any minute, from a coughing recess of the house, yet another ancient would emerge. “Good morning,” he would say. “You must be Robert. Let me introduce myself. I’m your mother’s mother’s father’s father.”

I don’t recall how many of us filed into the Kapitan on the day I first learned the rudiments of ostrich riding on an Oudtshoorn ostrich ranch. Gaffy, I’m sure, didn’t come. He often stayed home: he was on the brink of turning a hundred. A cricket fan, he was dead set on scoring his century. “Slow but steady,” he would say. “I’ll let the other chaps hit out.” He certainly wasn’t going to throw it all away on a trip to see some foolish ostriches in this heart-stopping heat.

So Gaffy wasn’t there. But his watch was.

I never figured out whether he gave it to me as something valuable, an heirloom for the oldest boy on his tenth birthday, or because it didn’t work too well. It was a wonky watch. It had an immaculate round face, fine numbering as delicate as a hair, and a bold, brassy shine. But the long hand was bent and scratchy. It would get snarled up and then spring forward, so the minutes didn’t always arrive on time. But it was my first watch and I loved it; I loved it well enough to invent all sorts of business that required someone to announce the hour. It was a watch with a history and now it could transport me into adulthood.

Gaffy had brought it from the old country in 1910 when, at age forty-five, he’d immigrated to South Africa as a painter-decorator. He came from a Scottish border hamlet called Biggar, some miles south of Edinburgh. “Biggar,” Gaffy would say, “is far smaller than you think.” It wasn’t a good joke, and he made it far too often, but when I heard it for the first time I remember laughing and thinking, with pleasure, that I
was catching on to the tricks adults played with words.

So the watch went with me on the ostrich trip. It was a blistering Oudtshoorn day; so hot we could have fried an egg — perhaps an entire chicken — on the rooftop of our Opel Kapitan. The steel concertina watch-strap started pinching and sweating in the heat. I took the watch off, cradling it in my palm. While waiting my turn to ride the ostriches, I joined a tour of the farm, and at one of the paddocks I noticed a tatty ostrich hen pecking at the earth. Finding the stone of her fancy, she ate it; picking out a second and a third, she arched her neck to swallow. I asked our guide about her odd behavior: was she sick, like when Blacky, our cat, ate grass?

No, he explained, this was normal. To stay alive, an ostrich has to keep three pounds of stones in its gut for grinding its food into submission. The stones serve as surrogate teeth: this is a creature with molars in its stomach.

“Did you know they eat diamonds too?” He paused so we could grasp that fact.

“One of the first and biggest diamonds discovered in South Africa was found three hundred miles north of here,” he continued. “That was long, long ago, about a hundred years. That shiny stone changed the course of history. Problem was, there weren’t any other diamonds around. Geologically speaking, that stone had no right being there. Today we know an ostrich must have eaten it, walked two hundred miles, then pooped it out. That ostrich gave a lot of prospectors a mighty headache. He got them wasting their time, looking in all the wrong places.”

The guide peered down at the children’s contingent to see if we were suitably impressed.

I loved it. This guy was a mine of natural history know-how, a walking Chappies Chewing Gum wrapper. I got to thinking about Granny with her rumbly stomach: how much worse if she had been an ostrich, her innards clacking away like castanets every time she ate lamb?

A huge ostrich rooster sauntered over to our tour. He peered down at us from across the fence, head on one side, as we digested all this information. Then suddenly his neck unfurled in a cobra strike. All I felt was a nudge in my hand. But in a flash, my watch had gone. He’d snapped it up and snaffled it down as if it were some pesky living thing: a gnat or a dragonfly. I saw little shivers as it passed down his long, long neck.

I was inconsolable, abruptly cut adrift.

The man wrapped an arm around my shoulder and beckoned the others toward a small museum in a corner of the farm. “The ostrich,” he said when we got there, “is a formidable omnivore. That means an animal that eats anything.
Most of all, it likes shiny things, as this young lad found out when he lost his watch back there. There's just about nothing an ostrich won't eat.” He turned and winked in our parents’ direction: “Maybe your mom wishes you were more like little ostriches that just eat what’s put in front of them.”

I wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

Then the man began passing around objects retrieved from the stomachs of old ostriches: spark plugs, sticks, metal ashtrays, sheep bones, soda cans, baling wire, a high-heeled shoe, copper piping, the shiny skeleton of a kitten. Watery-eyed, I ran my fingers over them. Their edges and ridges were all rubbed off. Every object felt as sleek as the skimming stones I collected along river beds, smoothed and tumbled by time.

Our guide finally began to register the level of my distress.

“OK. Let’s say you haven’t lost your watch; let’s say that ostrich is just looking after it for a while.”

He made it sound like a pawn shop, like the one where Gaffy had left his walking stick and his teeth when he had run out of cash.

The man was talking down to me. I was beginning to lose my cool.

“OK. When can I come and fetch it?”

He paused. He reached down for a black, sharp handled comb protruding from a sock. He ran his thumb nail up and down it, then passed it through his hair.

“You must understand, my boy. An ostrich can live a long, long time. Sometimes as long as a man. You might have to come back in thirty years.”

The man began passing around objects retrieved from the stomachs of old ostriches: spark plugs, sticks, metal ashtrays, sheep bones, soda cans, baling wire, a high-heeled shoe, copper piping, the shiny skeleton of a kitten.

Thirty years! I did some instant arithmetic. I knew how long one school day felt: a school day was endless. There were eighty school days in a school term and a hundred and twenty terms in thirty years ...

That night I went to bed with nothing left to wind. In six hours, I knew, deep in that big bird’s tummy, the ticking would stop for good.

I lay there, wide awake, trying to wrap my mind round so much time. When you’re eight, an ostrich is a hundred feet high. And thirty years lies as far ahead as the Stone Age lies behind.